

“You so damn worried about that ole dog,
he’s yours.” He strolled back to his truck,
gunned it, and slewed off, spraying gravel. 20
The dog whined harshly.

By the road,
gnats rose waist-high as I waded through
the dry weeds, looking for a rock.
I knelt down by the dog—tail flick—
and slammed the rock down twice. The first 25
blow did the job, but I had planned for two.
My hands swept up and down again. I grabbed
the hind legs, swung twice, and heaved the dog
into a clump of butterfly weed and vetch.
But then I didn’t know they had names, 30
those roadside weeds. His truck was a blue Ford,
the dog a beagle. I was seventeen.
The gnats rose, gathered to one loose cloud,
then scattered through coarse orange and purple weeds.

Lisel Mueller (b.1924)

When I Am Asked

When I am asked
how I began writing poems,
I talk about the indifference of nature.

It was soon after my mother died,
a brilliant June day,
everything blooming.

I sat on a gray stone bench
in a lovingly planted garden,
but the day lilies were as deaf
as the ears of drunken sleepers
and the roses curved inward.
Nothing was black or broken
and not a leaf fell
and the sun blared endless commercials
for summer holidays.

I sat on a gray stone bench
ringed with the ingenue faces
of pink and white impatiens
and placed my grief
in the mouth of language,
the only thing that would grieve with me.